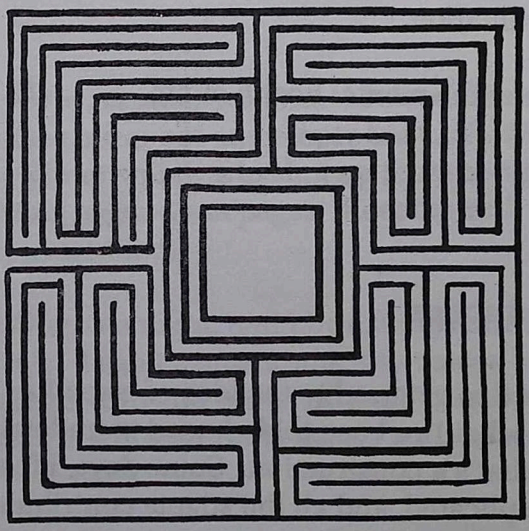
functionally ill:

adventures with mental health



becoming bipolar

Laura-Marie

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introduction

It's hard to get used to the idea of myself as mentally ill, but that's what I've been told. I need to understand what's real, and what's a construction. Some days, I feel fine. The brain is complicated, and all the stigma contributes to the confusion.

I'm writing this zine so others can know what it feels like to be me. Also, it could be entertaining. People are curious about the voices in particular. I am too—I wonder if other people's voices are like mine.

I know there are mental health zines already, and I hope *functionally ill* can contribute something to the genre. Thank you for being with me as I step into this world.

what mania feels like

I don't like how it feels to feel crazy. Mania is bad. My thinking is off, and I can tell.

I don't like being "up"–I don't like not sleeping. I don't like being impulsive, going a mile a minute, the sensation of being out of control. Some people enjoy their manic times, but I don't like them one bit.

Manic episodes are much more rare for me than depressed ones. My last week-long manic episode was around Thanksgiving, and it seemed to be triggered by a very social weekend. Being among people can be rewarding but is undeniably stressful, and I have to be careful not to overdo human interaction. When I was a teacher, I would get manic sometimes too.

I'm very verbal, peppy, erratic, sometimes full of jokes and rhyming, other times burnt out and empty but still wired. Talking quickly and not wanting to shut up (but saying things I shouldn't). Writing pages upon pages. Keeping Erik awake with one-sided conversation.

I sleep only a few hours a night, and I find it difficult to eat also. I look horrible. I can't concentrate. My voices become more difficult to cope with and more difficult to ignore. They're more likely to say disturbing things and get screamy.

what depression feels like

Just about everyone knows what depression feels like, but I will explain mine anyway.

I need the comfort of the ones I love, but I hate myself so much that I have a hard time asking for help—I don't want to inflict myself on anyone. Also, everything seems impossible—help seems impossible.

I sleep a great deal and cry a lot. Sometimes I'm not sure why I'm crying, but it can be very embarrassing because crying in public is not acceptable, embarrassing when I can't stop. I stay home even more than usual—t's difficult to leave the house.

There's a strange hollow feeling in my chest. Being conscious feels painful. Just thinking and feeling—reality, hearing things, seeing things—hurts.

There's nothing I would like to do. I go through the list of my usual activities, and nothing sounds appealing or even feasible. It's difficult to do anything but lie in bed. I'll sleep ten hours at night then nap in the day.

I hate myself completely—self-loathing consumes me. I feel utterly worthless and repulsive in every way, ugly inside and out. The world has no use for me, and I feel like a waste of resources. I feel like a burden to my loved ones and overcome with guilt. I'm sorry for my behavior and my self generally and apologize a lot.

I believe I've never been understood or properly cared for. No one will see me for who I am, and no one will ever know me deeply. Human relationships seem futile. I feel unloved and unlovable.

The world seems like a barren, evil, harmful place, ruined beyond any possible redemption, and there's no point in trying to help. There's no point in doing anything at all.

A common thought that plays in my head over and over is, "I can't do it anymore." Variations are, "I can't do this anymore," and "I can't live." It's not that I want to kill myself—any activity like that seems far off and far too difficult to manage. It's desperation more than violence. I feel like I can't go on in any way—continuing from the present into the future seems impossible, the little tasks and the big tasks likewise.

Rarely I do feel self-destructive and self-loathing in a way that feels violent—these times are few and far-between, more like a mixed state—I'm depressed but get wired within it, and my energy is very strange. I get help from Erik, and just anything to get my mind to another topic and calm me down again.

what the voices sound like

I hear voices when I'm sleepy or relaxed, often in bed or in the car. They will be a layer of my thoughts, a chatter in the background. I usually try not to listen to them, but sometimes, it can help me fall asleep.

When I'm manic, the voices can be going at any time. Also when I'm manic, the voices are more likely to yell or scream, which is unpleasant and sometimes scary. The screaming is without words and can be multiple voices screaming at once. I would like to be able to turn them off, and I get a panicked, trapped feeling when I wish they would leave me alone, but I have no choice.

The voices are of men and women, sometimes people I know, but usually strangers. Occasionally a voice will be of a child. They almost always speak English (occasionally Spanish). Their tone is usually neutral. They often speak to one another, but only twice ever have they spoken to me. Both of these instances were scary, and what they said was very negative—both times, those voices were male and deep.

I've been hearing them ever since I can remember, so at least since I was four years old. It was only recently that I ever mentioned it to anyone: none of the counselors over the years asked about it, so I never mentioned it. It was never an important or even noteworthy part of my life until a couple years ago. I never get confused and think the voices are real.

The voices usually say boring stuff, forgettable. Every so often, they'll say something funny. Occasionally I'll try to listen–it's almost like eavesdropping. Lately for the first time I've heard them speaking nonsense words.

Often they say the connecting parts of sentences. For example, the voices will sound like this. "At the same time, what you might want to try is the way in which something might appear to be without the need of...."

Usually one voice will speak for a sentence or two, and then it will switch to another voice. There will be a long chain of disconnected sentences spoken by different voices. When the voices converse, it sounds like a conventional conversation in its cadences and inflections, but the actual content is empty. It's more the cadences and inflections than actual sense. The conversation will continue for just a minute or two at most, and then a different conversation will start, or another string of unrelated sentences by multiple voices.

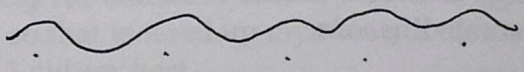
how I help myself

I need regular sleep hours. I also try to eat meals at predictable times and be careful not to let my blood sugar get low. I like the comfort of writing letters, physical contact with loved ones, phone calls that can get me out of my head.

Erik is endlessly patient with me. He listens to me, holds me, and repeats helpful sentences as many times as I need to hear them. He praises me and tries to remind me of the goodness of the world when I'm not thinking clearly.

Yoga makes me feel really good, but I can't do it on my own, and classes cost money. Therapeutic massage would probably be great, but again, it's expensive.

I like gardening, singing in the choir at my place of worship, making zines, interacting with friends on the computer–mediated socializing doesn't overwhelm me. Accomplishing everyday household tasks like washing the dishes gives me a sense that I'm capable of doing at least something to keep my little family going.



mental health letter

Jan 1 20xx

Dear friends and family,

My mental health problems have become more undeniable lately, and here's an update. I've had depression for a long time, and about four years ago I went on an SSRI for anxiety. Lately, I've been having manic episodes too, and at first I didn't think they were problematic, but they've been getting progressively worse. About a year ago, my last counselor told me I was bipolar.

A month or two ago, a close friend who I write a great quantity of letters to emailed me very alarmed at what I had been telling him about my feelings and my life. He insisted that I get a psychiatric evaluation. I agreed that the time to try to work through my problems on my own was over, and I needed more serious help.

I went to the county, and they evaluated me. I've been labeled mentally ill, and my mental illness has been declared "serious and chronic." They said that I'm bipolar, based on the depression and manic episodes, and that I have psychosis as well, based on the voices that I hear. I've been hearing voices since I was a young child, for as long as I remember, but only when I'm sleepy. However, within the past year or two, I've been hearing voices at other times too, while I'm

manic. Sometimes the voices yell and scream, which is very unpleasant.

I'm still at the beginning stages of getting in with county mental health, and it's slow going. I'm hoping that with some appropriate medication, my quality of life will improve greatly. I'm hoping I'll be able to find some meaningful work and have a more stable life soon.

I want to be open with all the people I'm close to about what's happening, and I don't want this to be a secret or shameful topic. I would be happy to answer questions. I hope mental illness can become less stigmatized over time, and I hope that any of you who have mental health problems can get help too. It's more common than people generally think and nothing to be embarrassed about.

Thanks for supporting me and caring about me.

love,
Laura-Marie

addendum from emails to M and S
January 10th and 11th 20xx

I feel extremely vulnerable telling strangers personal things about myself that I'm embarrassed about / ashamed of. I start getting a disconnected feeling, like everything that's happening is a dream, or like I'm floating.

Also, it was strange in the waiting room, when the people around me were so obviously unwell, and I was having an identity crisis: "Am I like these people?" I've developed some coping mechanisms that most mentally ill people haven't. Some days I probably look like them, but most days, I look fine.

The appointment was with a case worker to fill out many forms. My next appointment, with a psychiatrist, is not until

Feb 22nd. They're obviously seriously underfunded and understaffed. I don't know if I did a good job portraying myself to the caseworker. Some facts speak for themselves, but when I'm asked to elaborate on the severity of my symptoms, I'm afraid I understate. I didn't know I would be describing symptoms again–I wasn't properly prepared emotionally for that kind of trial. Also, my problems are all episodic, so that messed up my ability to quantify too. Anyway, I did my best.

The atmosphere of the place is uncomfortable and patronizing. It's a little like an elementary school classroom, with colorful bulletin boards and encouraging aphorisms, which creeped me out.

The caseworker gave me a ton of paperwork to read through about resources and classes and my rights. I get overwhelmed easily. I would almost like to throw it all away, or ask Erik to read it for me and let me know if there's anything important.

That's how I feel about it in general. I haven't done the research I should—I'm hiding my head in the sand. For example, I really need to research medications beforehand so I can have some say in what the psychiatrist prescribes, but I just cant bring myself to research. About the medication I think I really will have Erik do that for me.

the first clinic adapted from a post to my blog

I explained the situation to my friend P, who I trust. She found out the first thing to do: go to a certain clinic. So she picked me up at my apartment early in the morning, when it was cold outside. We found the correct building and parked in a big parking structure.

Inside, a security guard told us where to go. People were already waiting. We took a number and stood in line. I filled out forms. We sat in chairs. I was so scared, I was almost crying, but P seemed very unconcerned beside me, and I didn't cry. I felt like a failure because I had tried so long to take care of my problems on my own, and I was admitting defeat.

In the large waiting room, I looked at the other poor people: the black woman with lots of cleavage and a huge wooden cross. The Mexican woman with long, long hair. All the men with broken right arms. The jittery white woman who didn't sit still and kept folding and re-folding her jacket. The young white guy who spilled soda on the floor, and it looked like a puddle of pee.

I was given paperwork and sent upstairs. We waited there. More forms: my name, address, and date of birth over and over again, with different additional information every time: social security number, income, ethnicity, facts about Erik. Forms that had been photocopied so many times, the lines were dotted and the text was at a strange angle on the page.

A worker processed those forms, and I was sent downstairs again. This time, every chair was filled. I watched a thin Asian couple with their cute toddler-baby. The baby looked so bored. At first, he seemed terribly sick, the way he was holding his body, with his back arched and a spaced-out look. Then he shifted and seemed fine, which was a relief. I watched the mom play with him, and they spoke in a language I couldn't recognize. They fed one another bites of crackers.

I reached into my bag and pulled out a neon yellow plastic alligator that I had been given many years before. For no good reason, this alligator had been with me for four moves– it was given to me by an ex-cousin-in-law. I thought I would bring it with me to put in the toy pile or near the magazines, but this waiting room had no toys or magazines, just a TV in

the corner blaring news and later *The Price is Right* (which I refer to in my mind as *The Price is Wrong*).

So I gave the alligator to the little boy, and he looked at it and touched its ridges, its toes. The mom tried to get him to say thank you. I watched him play for half an hour. Then he went to sleep in his mother's arms, and the mom tucked the toy between two parts of the stroller. When a nurse called for them and it was time for them to go in to the doctor again, the boy woke up: "My alligator!" he told his mom, and she handed it to him. He clutched it tightly, and I watched him roll away.

We were lucky the entire visit lasted only three and a half hours. I had to go back the next week to do more forms.

the evaluation

Next I had to call county mental health and ask for an evaluation. The woman on the phone was discouraging. She said that the county only takes patients who have chronic and severe mental illness, and I sounded fine. She also said something about me being very young. I don't know what my age would have to do with anything, but on the phone I sound younger than I really am, so maybe she assumed I was a teenager.

Though she discouraged me from having an evaluation, I insisted, and we made an appointment for her to call me back that afternoon. The evaluation would be over the phone and last half an hour.

Erik was at work, unreachable, and I was terrified. My heart was racing, and I was just short of panicking. I called the friend who had insisted I get this evaluation in the first place. He was at work too, but he has a cell phone and could spare five minutes.

"I'm scared," I said.

"What are you afraid of?" he asked.

"I'm afraid they're going to lock me up," I said.

"They're not going to lock you up," he said.

"I'm also afraid of the other extreme. That I'll do a bad job portraying myself, and they'll say I'm fine."

He told me how it can take a long time to find right doctors and the correct diagnosis, and if I messed this up, there would be other chances. He told me how it was really important to take care of myself before my situation got to a critical point. I valued what he said to me, but I also valued his reasonable tone of voice and the way he seemed so solid and sure.

I made a list of things to insist were noted during the evaluation. I needed to make sure to talk about the voices and the mania, for example. I wrote it all down in pencil and rehearsed it in my head.

The worker called and asked a lot of questions. I tried to answer them thoroughly and not downplay my problems. I tried to be calm and strong. I told the truth about everything.

After the interview portion, she said I have chronic mental illness. She said I'm bipolar with psychotic tendencies. She read me a list she'd made of my symptoms with some detail about the voices—I guess it was important that there's more than one and that they talk to eachother.

At the very end, she tried to pep talk me. "Do you understand that what you've done today is very important?" she asked. "It took a lot of bravery to talk about these things." I was short with her and refused to be comforted.

intake at the mental health clinic

My first appointment was lost. I called to verify the time and was told that there was no record of my appointment in the computer. The worker I'd talked to before was apologetic, but there was nothing they could do. "Are you doing okay?" she asked. I wasn't, but when I'm not well, I can't articulate that. The holidays were coming soon, and the earliest she could get me in was a month away.

So when I went to my appointment, I knew it was only an intake appointment, which meant two more hours of forms. The clinic is nearby, and I drove myself. Erik was working, and I didn't think I needed my friend P.

I found the place, forced myself to walk in, went up to the window, and handed the worker my letter. I didn't say a word. She looked at the letter and handed it back to me, called someone on the phone to say their two o'clock was waiting, and told me to take a seat.

The waiting room was full of crazy people—poor crazy people, mostly white, and they looked at me. I was obviously new. Many of them seemed dirty and were wearing too many jackets. I was dressed conservatively and felt very clean. Someone said hi to me, and I couldn't manage to respond.

I seated myself right by the coffee machine and took a zine out of my bag, but it was hard to read. A man who didn't look too good was chattering to himself and rocking. Art projects on the wall looked like they were made by kids, but I understood that they were made by grownups. I read encouraging phrases on colorful bulletin boards, and I read announcements that were taped to the wall: a tai chi class was bring offered on Tuesdays. Would I be able to take that tai chi class, and would I want to?

A woman opened the door and called my name. I got up and went to her. I followed her down halls, past rooms of people, to an area of cubicles. She directed me to hers. I sat—she sat at her desk and didn't talk to me. I held my bag on my lap and looked around.

Her cubicle was undecorated. There was a metal bookshelf with piles of forms—the bookshelf had some old dinosaur stickers stuck on it. There was her desk with her computer. She had a stack of papers that she was putting into an envelope for me. She was folding them into thirds.

On her desk was a clear plastic cup with pens in it, and a few packets of salt and pepper. "These are for you," she said. "You can look at them at home." I took the papers and put them in my bag.

She seemed about my age, around 30. She was fair and had pale hair, and her accent was strongly Eastern European. Her handwriting was as well: ornate and beautiful.

My mind was full of questions: how long she had been in this country, what was her job title, and why didn't she decorate? I wanted her to talk to me as a person and see me as I am. But I was too nervous. I had to pretend everything was a dream in order to get by. When I'm afraid, I often go silent like this, but my mind races with thoughts.

She read my file for a long time, and I watched her. There was a note that my first appointment had been lost. There was a summary of my symptoms that I caught a glimpse of. I mostly couldn't see what she was reading.

"Are you on Medi-cal?" she asked, but she pronounced it like "medical."

"No," I said.

"How much money do you make?"

"Just me?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, and I told her.

"But my husband makes more," I said. She wrote down numbers and frowned. She looked at a chart and saw that my monthly payment would be almost three hundred dollars a month.

"This isn't good," she said. "You should be on Medi-cal. Are you and your husband legally married?"

"Yes," I said.

"I'll speak to my supervisor," she said. "We need to do something about this—this is too much." She was staring at the three hundred dollars a month figure and seemed extremely troubled.

"Maybe I overestimated how much my husband makes," I said. Erik's employment has been sporadic over the past few months. I had been giving her numbers based on our taxes from the year before.

She got a new form, and we negotiated. The new monthly payment was something reasonable.

Looking at the information in my file, she filled out more paperwork, and I was patient as her beautiful handwriting filled the blanks.

Meanwhile, I could hear a man and woman rush down the hall and enter the cubicle next door. Every word they said was clear. The woman explained in animated language how her psychiatrist wouldn't give her her prescription and how she was violating probation by self-medicating. The man seemed competent and compassionate, and his energy matched his client's. They talked about court dates and personality conflicts. They spoke quickly, and something in me longed to be like them.

When they left, it was abrupt. The man was going to help his client—she would be assigned to a new psychiatrist. They continued to talk as they walked away quickly down the hall. The silence after they left was deafening.

"There's no privacy!" I said.

"What was that?" my caseworker asked, pausing in her writing to look at me.

"There's no privacy!" I said, gesturing in the direction where the voices had been.

She gave me a sheepish look. "I'm sorry," she said, and she went back to the form. Periodically she would separate some papers and give me a pink or yellow copy to put with my other papers.

Then it was time for more evaluation. She asked me questions much like the ones I had already answered with the discouraging worker who I had hated on the phone: detailed, terrible. Questions where to say the answers, I had to admit things I had never told anyone before except maybe Erik. It was almost physically painful to answer them, and the most difficult part was when she asked me to specify how often certain problems bothered me. "A little, or a lot?" she asked. I constantly battled my desire to understate.

I didn't see why I had to answer these questions over again, and I was afraid that since I was unprepared, I wasn't doing a good job this time. I kept telling myself to breathe and be honest, calling myself back from elsewhere, taking myself off auto-pilot because my auto-pilot can't be trusted. I needed to make a conscious effort to be super-honest.

But how could I really answer these questions? So many of them, I considered myself a poor judge. When she asked whether I have unrealistic expectations of people, I started to giggle because it all seemed absurd. Of course I have

unrealistic expectations of people, but her question was really about degree. How unrealistic was she thinking? But she wasn't thinking at all—she was reading off a list.

My perspective kept switching—I would think of an answer that was honest and true according to my use of terms, then think of how an imagined regular person would use the terms—how I look from the outside, how someone else would answer this question for me, or what Erik would say, if he was there. I would also consider the spirit of the question, what the question was getting at, and imagine how I should answer it.

The situation was complicated, and my caseworker seemed tired. I didn't trust her to write down accurately what I was saying anyway, or even to hear me correctly.

"Do you feel isolated?" she asked.

"Yes."

"A little, or a lot?"

"Mmm...a lot."

"Do you participate in leisure activities?"

"Mmm...."

I've spent my entire life trying to convince every person I meet that I'm okay. Trying to portray my secret inner reality to a stranger who asks a series of confusing questions—every second, I had to override a lifetime of habit—habit born of self-preservation. It felt dangerous, though rationally I knew that the overworked Eastern European woman wasn't going to hurt me.

"I go to church?" I offered. "I sing in the choir." She wrote something down.

"Do you exhibit any bizarre behaviors?"

I was in no position to decide whether my own behaviors are bizarre. I have some odd habits, but would they qualify? Bizarre sounds terrible. "I don't think so," I said.

"Do you have any visual or auditory hallucinations?"

I tried not to let my voice crack. I tried very hard not to sound like I was crying.

"A little, or a lot."

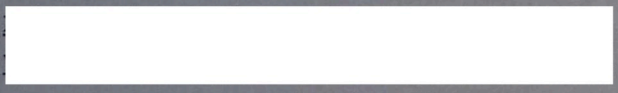
She took me back to the waiting room so someone could make me an appointment with a psychiatrist. She was behind the window with the man who peered into his monitor. "I have February 22nd with Dr X, and February 26th with Dr Y. Which one of those would work for you?"

"I'll take February 22nd."

He printed out a piece of paper and showed me the date and time of the appointment.

"Nice to meet you," the Eastern European woman said. But I didn't feel that we had met. I didn't even know her name.

Thank you for reading *functionally ill*, my first mental health zine. Thanks to Erik and my closest friends and relatives for their ongoing support.



Action can get lost in discussion.

go to primary care clinic
physical check-up
Stockton + Broadway
place to start
walk-in
7:30 am — from there
4600 Broadway —
county pays
875-1055

research it
neurotransmitter

white people hostility — pathological?

How I'm presenting myself.
What do you want from the encounter, and cater what you do to that.
honest
how suicidal
plan — locked up
faith in the system

cause
legitimate fears
not info

second opinion

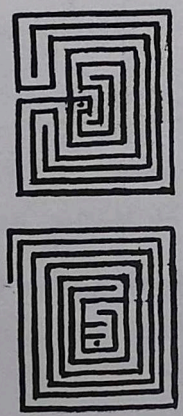
social component
biology — social factors

cocktail
1-2-3

social support

mood stabilizer
Depacurt
Lithium

How to make
a good confession



Can I be trusted to speak about my own mental illness?